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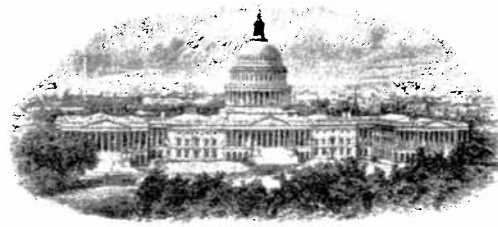
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April 28, 2009

The Honorable Eric Shinseki
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

I write to express my grave concern about the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) conduct regarding procedures to set up and reprocess medical equipment, in particular endoscopy equipment. As you know, since December 2008, VA clinics in Florida, Tennessee, and Georgia have identified problems related to the set up and reprocessing of their endoscopy equipment. Endoscopes, auxiliary water tubing, and other instruments were improperly set up and irregularly reprocessed.

I am truly disconcerted by the failure of the VA to properly comply with the manufacturer's instructions, putting patients at these facilities at risk of cross contamination. Patients who were potentially treated by the affected equipment may have been in contact with or contracted one or more viral diseases, including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Hepatitis B virus (HBV) and Hepatitis C virus (HCV). This represents a risk pool of almost eleven thousand individuals.

Although the VA has responded in a timely manner to the discovery of these problems by notifying patients and providing them with adequate testing, it is quite troubling that it took the VA up to 6 years to identify and disclose the issue. Patients who undertook endoscopies as early as April 2003 at the Murfreesboro GI Clinic in Tennessee and May 2004 at the Miami GI Clinic in Florida only learned a few weeks ago that they may have contracted a viral disease. This is unacceptable. Since patients were notified and tested, thirty individuals have been diagnosed with either HIV, HBV or HCV. While these results were not linked definitely to the misuse of endoscopy equipment, the VA must take adequate action to address this potential eventuality.

Furthermore, I am concerned that because of these incidents patients will be reluctant to seek out necessary preventative health care measures. No one should be frightened to get tested because of the potential risk of contracting another disease through infected equipment. Routine screening and testing for diseases saves lives, prevents costly and invasive procedures and plays an essential role in preventative health care.

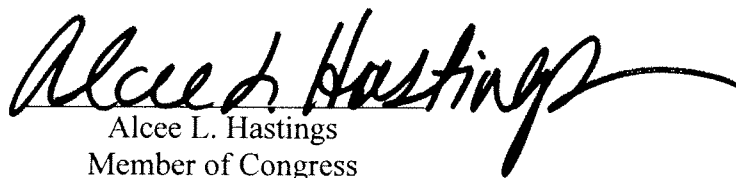
Endoscopies are used to help diagnose a variety of illnesses and conditions from ulcers to colon and rectal cancer. Colon cancer is the fourth most prevalent cancer in men and women. These potentially life-saving and life-improving measures will not be effective unless veterans can access services knowing that their health and well-being will not be jeopardized because of a failure to follow basic sanitary and procedural standards.

I urge the VA to create and implement a comprehensive and efficient set of procedures for the proper set up, use, reprocessing and maintenance of all reusable endoscopy equipment in all VA medical facilities throughout the United States. The safety of patients must remain the number one concern when establishing these protocols. It is necessary to develop stronger efforts to track and improve accountability within all medical facilities. We also request that every health care professional be retrained on standard operating procedures. Additionally, it is critical that the VA continue its efforts to reach out to patients at risk, provide them with testing and care, and coordinate with other facilities when patients are out of state.

Our government has a moral responsibility to provide our veterans with the very best quality of health care. These brave men and women have made the ultimate sacrifice for our country. We must ensure that they are recognized, honored, and provided with the services they rightly deserve. Our veterans deserve no less.

Thank you in advance for your action on this important issue. In light of the extreme circumstances surrounding this matter, I urge your immediate attention to address the issue. I look forward to continuing to work closely with you in providing the best possible care for America's veterans. With warm regards, I remain,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Alcee L. Hastings". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress